EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN

June, 1962

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Editor
Robert A. W. Lowndes

Cover by
Hubert Carter

Editorial Consultants
Geraldine Cummins
Dr. Nandor Fodor
The Rev. Stephan A. Hoeller, D.D.

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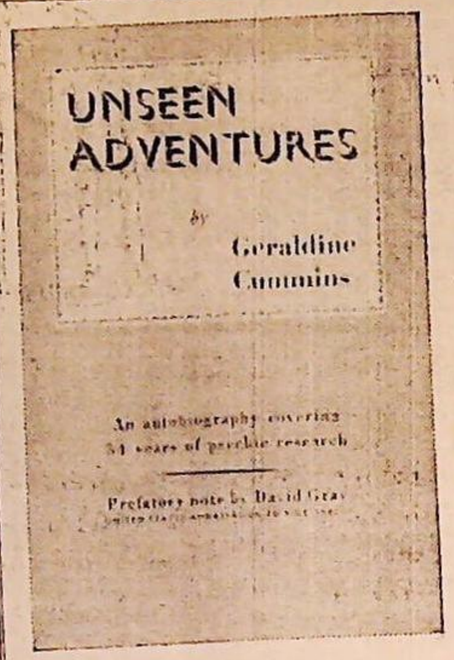

Miss Cummins, the well-known novelist and playwright, makes it clear that she has always been extremely critical of all spirit messages, carefully weighing each one with the thoroughness of a scientific investigator.

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Contributors
TO THIS ISSUE

GASTON BURRIDGE contributes to many magazines dealing with psychic phenomena, etc., and first appeared in our pages with "A Buttercup On His Tongue" (June 1961).

JEANNE de MARE is well-known to our readers for such articles as "The Cosmic Mission of the United States" (in our March 1960 issue) and "William Blake and Extra-Sensory Perception" (in the June 1960 issue); her last appearance was with "Joan Cocteau and the Supersensible" (January 1961).

EDWARD D. HOCH, of Rochester, New York, is a storehouse of unusual material, which he used to work into fascinating mystery stories featuring his immortal? character, Simon Ark. (That question mark after "immortal" is not a misprint. Simon Ark shows signs of being many centuries old!) He first came to us with "The Riddle of the Circumcellions" in the August 1961 issue; you saw his "Something in the Sky" in our last issue.

The Rev. STEPHAN A. HOELLER, D.D., D. Chr., K.C.T., F.T.S., is a priest of the American Catholic (Apostolic Episcopal) Church, and is attached to the Cathedral Church of St. Francis, Laguna Beach, California. He was educated in European Institutes of learning, including the University of Innsbruck, Austria,

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something in the sea

By EDWARD D. HOCH

There seems to be an interesting degree of agreement about strange creatures observed.

NOT LONG ago a news dispatch from London told of a new plan for trapping the so-called "Loch Ness monster" with the aid of a powerful army searchlight which would supposedly blind and bewilder the creature. It can safely be assumed that this effort will prove to be as fruitless as those that have gone before it, and no doubt our grandchildren will still be reading of the sea serpent in this Scottish lake long after the latest scheme has been forgotten. For the legends of an unknown something in the sea around us have existed almost since the beginning of recorded history.

Although writers as early as Aristotle had studied the creatures of the sea and their habits, the first to write in detail about the unknown serpents of the world's oceans was apparently a Swedish archbishop named Olaus Magnus or Olaus the Great. Olaus wrote a somewhat fictional history of the Scandinavian nations in the early Sixteenth Century, in which he mentioned the "kraken" and other sea monsters of the northern waters. The kraken, as illustrated in Olaus the Great's book, seems to be a sort of giant octopus or squid, capable of engulfing whole vessels with its tentacles.

Although such creatures are generally found mainly in the pages of Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, and other writers, there is some evidence pointing to their occasional existence. Twenty-foot-long tentacles taken from the stomachs of dead whales would seem to confirm the possibility of giant squid or kraken, even though none of the creatures themselves have ever been captured. (One almost was, though—by the French corvette *Alecton* on November 30, 1861. It escaped after a bitter struggle with crew members armed with cannon and harpoons.)

But if the giant octopus of Olaus Magnus—and scores of other writers from Homer to Verne—can be explained, one of the other creatures pictured in his book cannot. The woodcut in questions shows a sea serpent 200 feet long and twenty feet around, attacking a sailing vessel off the coast of Norway. It is the earliest known rendering of the legendary sea serpent, and it has been reprinted in dozens of textbooks and encyclopedias since then. Although almost everything Olaus wrote was discredited at the time, later writers have pointed out that

something in the sea

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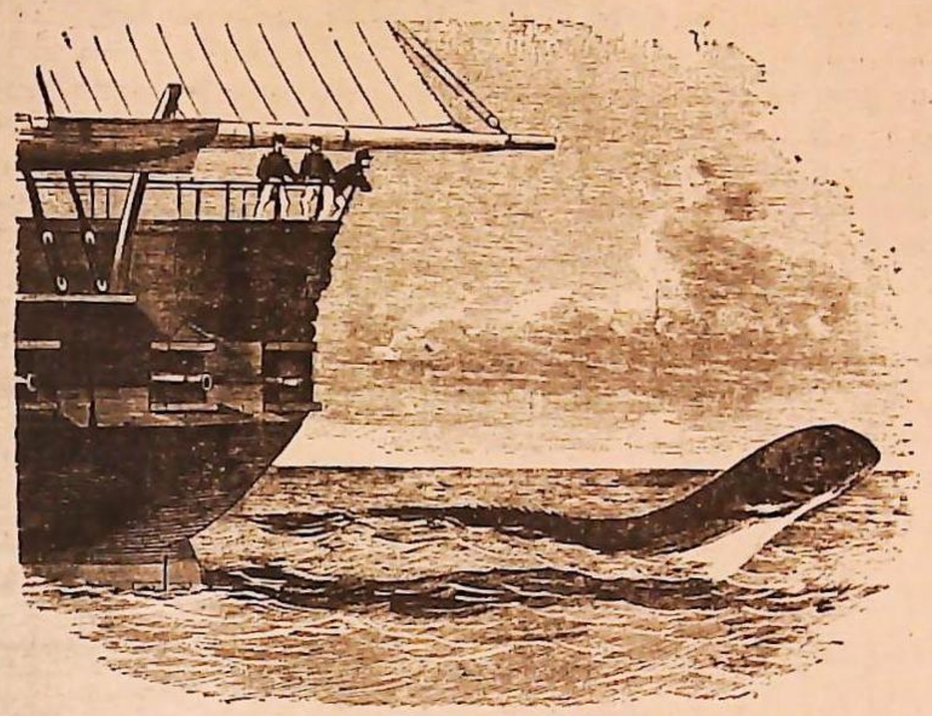
the kraken proved to be more real than was supposed. Perhaps the sea serpent, too, was not only a mythical beast.

In recent decades, men of learning have come more and more to believe in some undiscovered mammal of the ocean depths. Though it is probably not a true serpent in the sense of the much smaller Indian Ocean sea snakes, the thing that has been seen by so many sea captains through the years certainly has its supporters. One of the first of these was Professor A. C. Oudemans, who set forth his defense of the mysterious creature in a thick 1892 book, *The Great Sea Serpent*. The volume contains some 200 reports of serpent sightings, at least half of which would seem to have a ring of authenticity about them. Let us look at a few cases, drawn from the Oudemans's book and elsewhere.

On July 6, 1734, a Norwegian priest named Hans Egede sighted off the west coast of Greenland "a very terrible sea monster", which raised itself so high out of the water that its head reached above the top of the ship. The body of the serpent seemed to be covered with a hard skin, and broad flippers extended from either side.

Near the end of August, 1745, off the coast of Norway, a Commandant von Ferry and his crew sighted a sea serpent. They fired at it with guns, but the creature dived and escaped them.

Between August 10, 1817 and August 23, 1817, a number of persons sighted a sea serpent in Massachusetts Bay, especially near the Gloucester harbor. A Boston committee was appointed to study the reports, most of which seemed to agree that the creature was some eighty to ninety feet in length, with a head like a snake and a jointed body. It was dark brown in color. In all, the committee collected reports from hundreds of people, some of whom claimed to have been within twenty feet of the serpent. Although the creature seems to have departed Massachusetts Bay after August 23rd, it was seen again by two ships some six weeks later, off Rye Point in Long Island Sound.



CAPTAIN M'QUHAE'S SEA-SERPENT.

In the years that followed, sea serpent reports seemed to grow more numerous, probably because of the ever-growing number of ocean-going craft. In 1820 the commander of the *Lady Combermere* reported sighting a serpent some seventy to a hundred feet long in the North Atlantic. The captain and a number of passengers on the *Royal Saxon* sighted a sea serpent only 35 yards from their ship in 1829, and in 1833 a fishing crew off Halifax saw the head and neck of a serpent.

One of the most important sightings occurred on August 6, 1848, when the H.M.S. *Daedalus*, a British man-of-war, encountered a sea serpent in the South Atlantic. The serpent was more than sixty feet in length, and passed close to the vessel at a speed of some twelve to fifteen miles an hour. The captain and crew had it in

view for about twenty minutes. An account appeared in both the *London Illustrated News* and the *Times,* stirring great interest throughout England.

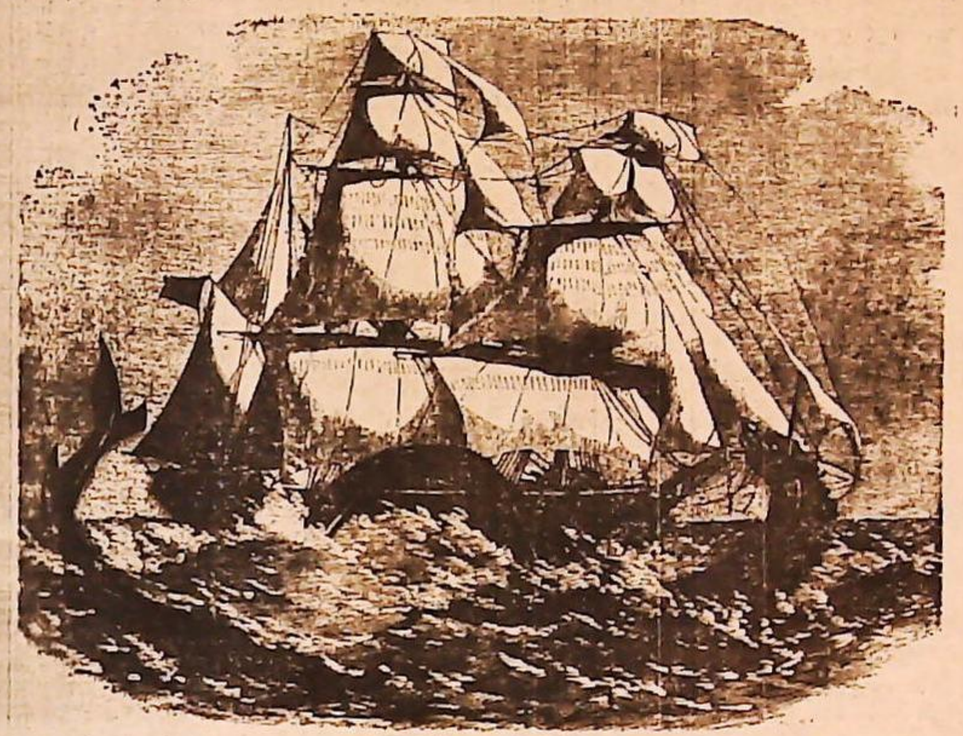
In 1848, a sea serpent was sighted west of Oporto, and in 1856 one actually seems to have ventured into the English Channel. A year later there was a sighting off St. Helena, and in 1872 came the first of many reports from the coast of Scotland. Always there were the "lumps" above the water's surface, like the coils of a giant serpent in motion.

A report by the British royal yacht *Osborne* in 1877 again mentions two large flippers, and here as elsewhere there is some evidence that our "serpent" might really be a large, long-necked mammal not unlike the ancient Brontosaurus—but with flippers instead of legs. This description was confirmed again by a sighting in December of 1893, off the west coast of North Africa.

An unusual variation in the descriptions came in 1905, when the yacht *Valhalla,* cruising off Brazil, sighted a serpent that seemed to have a large fin on its back. Earlier sightings had mentioned humps or lumps, which were believed to be the various coils of the serpent, but never before had there been a fin. One other report, from the armed merchant cruiser *Hilary* during World War I, mentions a finned serpent spotted in the North Sea. It was later learned that a German submarine in the area also reported a sighting.

Another German submarine, the *U-28,* had encountered a sea serpent in the early days of the war. On July 30, 1915, after torpedoing a British steamer, the captain and crew spotted the serpent floundering in the area of the wreckage. They reported it as about 66 feet long, and though they attempted to photograph it they were not fast enough.

But the most famous of all modern sea serpents is, of course, the Loch Ness monster. Every year since its first sighting in 1933 has brought new reports and schemes for its capture, new sketches by eye witnesses and new photographs showing a blurred black something in the distance. One man even reported seeing the serpent on dry land, crossing a road near Loch Ness. Some recent books and articles on the subject have attempted to point



out that the legend of a Loch Ness monster goes back far beyond 1933.

And so the reports continue, from California and Alaska, from a lake in Argentina and a river in South Africa, from sea captains as distant from each other as Panama and New Zealand. Almost always the sea serpent is brown, almost always between sixty and a hundred feet in length, sometimes with fins or flippers, sometimes without. Whatever the truth, wherever their lair, no one can doubt the existence of sea serpents.

Or can they?

Some *have* doubted, and their doubts—like the doubts of flying saucers—have centered on two main explanations: (1) That the sea serpent reports are mainly hoaxes, and (2) that they are incorrect observations of common sea creatures.

And true enough, there have been sea serpent hoaxes. The most famous of them occurred in the summer of 1845, when a

man named Albert C. Koch exhibited in New York City a so-called "fossil sea serpent". The skeleton of the serpent was 114 feet long, and Koch had mounted it in a slightly wavy position, exactly as it might have appeared while traveling through the water. As might be expected, the crowds came and paid to see the fossil. But before long an expert zoologist recognized the skeleton as actually two fossils of a whale-like animal which had been joined together—and further investigation proved that Koch had pieced several fossils together to achieve his sea serpent.

Somewhat earlier, a Captain Joseph Woodward had perpetrated a more successful serpent hoax. He claimed that his ship had sighted a sea serpent in May of 1818 off New England—only nine months after the famous serpent of Massachusetts Bay. The creature had badly frightened his crew and had actually pursued the vessel for five hours. It was some decades before investigators proved the entire episode—and Woodward's rank of Captain as well—to be nothing more than a hoax.

More common is the explanation that sea serpents are nothing but the ignorant observations of laymen unacquainted with the sea. Despite the large number of lifetime sailors who bear witness to their existence, the serpents have been identified by doubters as any of eight other familiar things.

The explanation most often advanced is that the serpent is really a group of porpoises swimming in a line, rising and diving in the water to give the appearance of a serpentine creature. Another solution would have them a flight of sea-fowl near the water's surface, and a third possibility is a large mass of seaweed.

From such possibilities it is not much of a jump to a group of basking sharks, and it is certainly true that the shark explanation would tend to explain the occasional reports of fins on the serpents' backs. Another possibility sometimes suggested is the Ribbon Fish, which often reaches a length of thirty feet. It is fairly common in Mediterranean waters. One more not uncommon sea creature is the Nemertine, which might grow to be forty-five feet in length.

Then there are sea lions, which might confuse some inexperienced viewer if seen from a distance as they are breaking the surface of the water. And

last—perhaps the most likely solution to a number of the reports—is the giant squid or kraken mentioned earlier. Certainly a creature perhaps fifty feet long, with its great tentacles reaching out along the water's surface, might easily bring cries of "sea serpent" from the most experienced sailors.

So there they are—a riddle and eight or nine explanations to it. Enough, surely, to convince the most vociferous serpent fan that such things never existed.

Still...

It was 11:55 A.M. on the 30th day of December, 1947—not so long ago at all. The S.S. *Santa Clara*, owned by the Grace Lines, was 118 miles due east of Cape Lookout. en route from New York to Cartagena.

When it hit a sea serpent.

The third mate saw a snake-like head break the surface of the water some thirty feet off the vessel's starboard bow, and two other mates also witnessed it. The creature's head was about five feet long, on a body about three feet thick. It appeared that the ship had cut it in two, as the water was stained blood-red over a squarish area some forty feet wide. The three witnesses stated that about thirty-five feet of the serpent's length was visible, and since no one was on the other side of the vessel it is not known how great a length might have been cut off on that side. The serpent's color was dark brown, and there were no fins, flippers, or humps visible. The sea was calm and blue on this day, with bright sunshine and perfect visibility.

The thing the *Santa Clara* hit was not a hoax. Nor was it porpoise or sea fowl or seaweed or shark or ribbon fish or nemertine or sea lion or giant squid.

Perhaps, after all, there *is* something in the sea...

■

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